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In the 2006 defense appropriations conference, which is wrought with tension over provisions on military detainee treatment and funding differences, one amendment is likely to get a collective nod of approval.

Rep. C.W. Bill Young (R-Fla.), chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, is planning to introduce an amendment this week that would change the Pentagon's ban on charitable donations to wounded soldiers that exceed \$20. And he is not alone. At least 17 other House members have been pressing for changes in the Pentagon's regulations.

Currently, Department of Defense (DoD) regulations forbid service members from accepting gifts worth more than \$20 from any outside source. The federal government's code of federal regulations prohibits federal employees from soliciting or accepting any gifts given because of their official position.

Until 1993, the Pentagon did not apply these rules to enlisted members of the military. Then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin issued a directive holding enlisted service members to the same restrictions as all other Pentagon employees.

Consequently, media reports in recent weeks have said that wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center may be violating federal law by accepting gifts worth more than \$20 and that these cases must therefore undergo military legal review. The current rule bars soldiers from accepting items such as DVDs and tickets to sporting events if they exceed \$20.

Young, emboldened by his wife's letter to President Bush asking him to reform the controversial policy, is taking the lead in presenting an amendment to defense conferees this week that would clear up the Pentagon's current language.

"I have been working with the Army and the DoD to develop language that we all agree solves

the problem," Young told The Hill.

He said it is not a matter of setting higher gift caps. "I do not know if it is a question of limits; it is a question that financial assistance to a wounded soldier should be considered as generosity," he said.

He added that the needs of the soldiers vary; some have long-term needs, others temporary. "You can't put that in law," he said.

Aiding a soldier who has already gone to war and was wounded fighting should not be considered a bribe, Young said.

"All that kid would do for me, he has already done [by going to war]," Young said.

Young said that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld agreed to a change in the language of the ethics regulations. At press time, the legal counsels of the House, the Army and the Pentagon were reviewing the language, Young said.

"We are at the point where they [all] agree on the language," Young said, but he refused to detail the amendment.

He said he plans to show the amendment to Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), chairman of the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, and to Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) ranking member on the House panel.

"I am having overwhelming response from my colleagues," Young said.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) recently sent a letter to Rumsfeld urging him to lift "the senseless

restriction."

"These 'ethics opinions' are designed to prevent bribery of military personnel, but instead are limiting the ability of individuals and charities to support our men and women in uniform," Kirk wrote.

His letter was signed by 16 other members of Congress, including Reps. John Spratt (D-S.C.), Virgil Goode (R-Va.), Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), Jim Matheson (D-Utah), John Doolittle (R-Calif.), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), John Shimkus (R-Ill.), Tom Feeney (R-Fla.), Geoff Davis (R-Ky.), Walter Jones (R-N.C.), Mark Udall (D-Colo.), Robert Brady (D-Pa.), Charlie Bass (R-N.H.) and Mark Kennedy (R-Minn.).

Kirk said he met with Rumsfeld after he sent the letter. Rumsfeld expressed support for reforming the law to give wide latitude for gifts to wounded soldiers, Kirk said.

"He said that they wanted to fix this and get clarity in the law," Kirk said.

After the lawmakers made these comments, Rumsfeld has started working with Young on acceptable language.

Meanwhile, Emanuel separately has introduced the Wounded Heroes Gift Fairness Act. The act asks for changes in federal ethics regulations to allow wounded members of the military to receive gifts from charitable organizations. The act exempts soldiers recovering at military medical facilities from regulations that prevent them from accepting gifts worth more than \$20 from approved charitable organizations.

Emanuel said he has not joined forces with Republicans to support Young's amendment to the defense appropriations conference report.

"The key thing is not what vehicle you attach it to, but it is about getting the same result as

everyone else," Emanuel said.